Voices from the Gaps

Pamela Mordecai

> ***And I don't know how it is for other writers, but when I write, regardless of what I'm writing, or how I approach the writing task, I've got this image or shape or feeling inside me somewhere, a sort of embroidery pattern, a sort of magic-pencil outline, a sort of distant melody, that knows how what I'm writing should look, that senses its right shape and sound, somehow. And I know that I have to have faith in this weird process, and that it's best not to mind other people too much. Take their advice, yes, but not mind them too much.***
>
> — Pamela Mordecai

Quick Facts

* Born in 1942
* Jamaican-born poet, novelist, and children's book writer; currently lives in Canada
* Writes in patois

Biography

Tropical weather, crashing waves on an island shore, and sun-filled days surrounded Pamela Mordecai throughout her childhood. But the plethora of lushness and beauty were not the original inspiration for this Jamaican-born author. It was instead the devastating violence of Hurricane Charlie, hitting the island in 1951, which brought about Mordecai's first poem at the young age of nine. This first piece of writing blossomed into many others, stretching across multiple genres including poetry, short stories, textbooks, and children's books. A quote from Mordecai seems to sum this up: "I guess I've multiple personalities, and they all need to speak." The one thing that weaves through all her styles of writing, though, is her tie to her Caribbean home.

This page was researched and submitted by Christa Yelich-Koth, Andrea Holstein and Sarah Whiteley on 5/27/99.

Voices from the Gaps

Pamela Mordecai

Biography continued

The physical place where she grew up is not the only factor that appears in her works. In an interview, Mordecai stated that "the events in my life are the resource that I draw on for my work." Attending Catholic schools from elementary through college brought religion into many of her writings. Having spent much of her early years with her grandparents weaves the theme of family into her works. But there is also an academic background to her creations. A Bachelor's in English from a small Catholic college in Massachusetts, two teaching diplomas, and a Ph.D. in English from the University of the West Indies add polish and intellect to the mix. These pieces blend together with Mordecai's love of "rhyme, rhythm and wordplay, [and] the sound aspects of language[, which] are important in all [her] writing, poetry and prose," which she reveals through the use of dialect, playing with aspect of languages English, French, Jamaican Creole, Jamaican English, and Patois (which combines British English and various West and Central African languages).

Children are a major focus for Mordecai. This interest turned her on to writing children's books and textbooks. When asked why she wanted to write about or for children, Mordecai said "I love writing for children, probably because I have the mental age of a four-year-old!" This childlike quality can be seen in many of her children's books, but in a lot of her adult poetry and short stories, usually not suited for children, still have children in them, usually as the narrator. She also attributes her life's work as having been "for and about children. I am interested in the literature of the Caribbean, in particular, the writing of women, but my concern for children is overriding. I have learned the craft of poetry by writing for children."

But there are a lot of works by Mordecai that do not deal with children. These are personal to Mordecai, often reflecting her own feelings or thoughts at the time. "I can get my own back through writing poems and stories; I can warn or threaten people […]; I can vent my anger, or grief, or disappointment […]." An example of this is *The True Blue of Islands*, a book written about Mordecai's brother, Richard, after his murder in 2004. Mordecai used this work to grieve and lament over this loss, which to her seemed senseless and empty. For Mordecai, writing is powerful, both for the writer, and for the reader. In the same interview, Mordecai emphasizes this by saying that "[she] wish[es] the young people at Columbine had known that writing would have been a more effective, more resounding, longer-range weapon than guns."

Voices from the Gaps

Pamela Mordecai

Biography continued

Her move with her husband, Martin, to Canada in 1993-1994 did not slow her down, or keep her from writing about her roots. The two of them created and ran the Sandberry Press, which is now her main publisher. Although she still writes about Jamaica, she had embraced her new home as well, becoming a member of the Writers' Union of Canada.

If writing and publishing were not enough, Mordecai stretched herself even further and branched into editing as well. When asked about why she decided to go into editing, it seemed like a natural progression for her. "When the two people are in sync, you both develop a sense of what's right and what's going to work, so you confirm each other's instincts. Two people are also better at crap-detecting […] whichever way, it's almost always a privilege to handle someone else's work, and I've learned a great deal from the various kinds of editing that I've done in my life […] if it works well, it's a rewarding collaboration between writer and editor […]."

To date, Mordecai has published over thirty books, and is currently working on a play commissioned by the Lorraine Kimsa Theater for Young People in Toronto. When asked why she wanted to write a play, Mordecai explains that a play still tells a story. "Turning my attention in a more focused way to writing stories could be seen as a kind of natural progression [from poetry]. It's as if I was headed that way all the time."

Mordecai's style of writing blends imagination, colors, the senses, and deep-rooted societal plight through touching tales of human interaction and plots that are true to life. She brings nature to life, giving a cloud a voice, painting the sun as a doting parent, and granting stars a musical quality. She is a poet and story-teller who captures the unaffected imagination of a child and this enables her to write for her target audience, which, in large part, are children or adults who are children at heart. Although her stories appear to have a deeper meaning than what is relayed on the page, what she does say about her writing is that "what I intend to say in a story is only part of it's meaning, and I count on my readers and my own re-readings of my stories and poems to tell me about things that I don't know are there till we all 'find' them."

Voices from the Gaps

Pamela Mordecai

Jamaican History

Good literature has no messages […] it offers experiences, maybe food for thought; it evokes a variety of responses. It's therapeutic. It purges […] I like to think that each [work] embodies its own enigma, is trying to solve its own life problem.

— Pamela Mordecai

Jamaican history began with the migration of the Arawak Indians from South America in 650 A.D. They named the land "Xaymaca", which in Arawak means "land of wood and water." The Arawaks lived in peace until 1494 when the Spanish invaded in search of gold and silver. The Spanish brought with them disease and all but exterminated the population by the end of the 16th century. Very few artifacts from this time period remain in Jamaica.

In 1655, the English invaded Jamaica in search for territory to inhabit. The Spanish surrendered without resistance, since the land was not rich in the resources they desired. Before they left, they armed their African slaves and freed them. They fled to the mountains where they formed a rebel group known as the "Maroons." Highly resistant to authority, the Maroons were never controlled by the English and in some areas were self-governing. They were led to Montego Bay by an African slave named Nanny, often called "Granny Nanny." A clever woman, Nanny was known for her keen war tactics and specialized in guerilla warfare. She was an important asset in the First Maroon War from 1720-1739. Today, Nanny is a symbol of strength for the people of Jamaica.

Another important figure in Jamaica's rich history is Samuel Sharpe, who was born a Creole slave in 1801. He was allowed an education, which was considered a privilege among slaves; very few were granted that opportunity. Sharpe was known for his sharp intelligence and far-sighted thinking and became a leader for the native Baptists in Montego Bay. His mission was to enlighten the public with the very controversial idea of abolishing slavery. He proposed that if the slaves boycotted English goods and services, the English would have to listen. He staged a passive resistance on Christmas Day, 1831, on which slaves ceased to work and threatened to continue the boycott until they were paid for their work and treated better. However, the word of the resistance got out and the English governor sent armed troops into St. James, where 500 slaves and fourteen English were killed. Sharpe was sentenced to be hanged on May 23, 1832 during a trial for the crime of conspiring the rebellion.

Pamela Mordecai

Jamaican History continued

The three colors on the Jamaican flag are red, which stands for the blood of martyrs, green, which stands for the vegetation of Africa, and gold, which stands for the wealth and prosperity Africa has to offer. Along with the color black, these represent the colors of " Pan-African Unity," a reference to the strength instilled in the people of Jamaica by a man named Marcus Garvey.

Garvey was born on August 17, 1887 in Jamaica. His philosophy was the root of the Rastafari movement and blended a rich religious belief with politics and economic opportunity. He believed that all black people should return back to Africa, and promoted the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which he founded in 1914. The organization's motto was "One God! One Aim! One Destiny!" and set out to provide African Americans with options of true freedom outside the bounds of America. In the 1920's, Garvey organized the Black National Movement, and believed heavily in separatism between the races, which had some backlash from both white and black people.

Today, Jamaica has claimed independence as of August 6, 1962. It remains a member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

Language

This is the sound that I hear when I'm writing, no mind what I'm writing, is the sound of Jamaica Talk. The rhythms and word play of this language, its verbal sound clash, its shrill or low Anansi keh-keh laughing, this is the noise that drives my tap-tap-tapping on the keyboard.

— Pamela Mordecai

Pamela Mordecai often writes in Jamaican Creole, or Patois. It is important to differentiate the terms Jamaican Creole and Patois from the linguistic terms creole and patois. Both terms describe categories of language, Patois being essentially the first link between two different languages. Once this form becomes stabilized through generational use, Patois has evolved into a creole. Also, Patois should not be confused with Jamaican English or Rastafarian English, as they are separate languages.

Language continued

Patois' creation lies in the history of slavery on the island of Jamaica. The languages of Western and Central Africans combined with British English to create patois. Along the way various other populations in Jamaica influenced patois, resulting in borrowed words from languages such as Portuguese, Spanish and Hindi. Patois exists primarily as a spoken language, and while standardized British English is used in official writing settings, patois has been used in Jamaican literature for around 100 years.

Mordecai's choice in writing in patois is a natural one; "all I have to do is put pen to paper you know and it comes," she explains. Mordecai employs Patois as a language she views as inherent to her as a Jamaican, and in appreciation of the circumstances of its formation. Therefore, her choice to use Patois is also a decidedly political one. It flies in the face of classical and western linguistic definitions of language. According to traditional classification, Patois is a "nonstandard," or it is often defined as a dialect of English. To Mordecai, this is not so; Patois, in its own entity, is "so suffused with energy and with metaphor and with just a way of seeing the world that Is quite different. " Mordecai acknowledges slavery as the root of Patois, and in understanding this history, she also rejects the lasting impositions of the colonizing British-the "standard" language of British English specifically.

Book Reviews

Journey Poem

Poetry tosses me about in all different kinds of directions.
— Pamela Mordecai

What is a journey? *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* defines it as "a traveling from one place to another." But if we tear apart that definition we find many meanings for each word. "Traveling" can be any sort of movement, whether physical, spiritual, emotional, or mental. A "place" can be a physical location like a home or a city, a stopping point in one's life, or a step in a sequence. With all these different combinations to describe a journey, one author uses them all to illustrate a journey from one place to another: the journey of her life.

Book Reviews continued

In *Journey Poem*, Pamela Mordecai uses poetry to describe moments and parts of her life to express her own journey. She chooses specific instants in her life and gives them the illusion of momentum to keep the book on a forward path. This means that instead of narrating a story that describes the process from one point to the next, Mordecai chooses to pick those specific points, showing how they impacted her life, and how it is those moments, and not the traveling in between, that is important.

The first poem in the book, "Walker," is an example of this. Mordecai uses this poem to speak about her mother's sudden death. The second half of the poem speaks about her grandfather's suicide years before. But why begin with a piece representing something that happened in the middle of Mordecai's life? Why not start at her own beginning, with her own birth? Mordecai is trying to show that a journey is indeed traveling from one place to another, but the things that affect us the most during that journey are not necessarily the beginning and the end. It is the moments in between that we remember, the stopping points in our own lives that cause us pain or joy. Mordecai's vision in placing this poem as the first one in her book was not to portray it as the beginning of her journey, but to show that it is the most important part.

The rest of the book has the same feel with poems that touch on specific points or memories of her life although they progress in a much more linear way. Mordecai does this by starting with the things that she thinks of as the earlier moments of her journey—her family and the place where she grew up. Poems about her father and her sister illustrate the importance of family in her life and how they surrounded her from the beginning. The poem about where she lived, the island of Jamaica, shows her closeness to the land and how she sees it as its own being: "I am a woman of a fierce green place my brows are mountains tendrils of winding rivers coil through my hair[…] you may drink at the springs of my eyes…" (13). This description shows the lushness of the island as well as the personality of the nature that surrounded Mordecai while growing up.

Like most journeys, there is always conflict along the way, some sort of obstacle to overcome. Mordecai's poems lead to the idea of forming a relationship -- both physical and emotional -- with someone else while trying to maintain her own values and identity. A good example of this is found in the poem "Exuent." This is a turning point for Mordecai where she gives up a relationship for her own beliefs. In it, the other person in the relationship gives her an ultimatum: either she gives him sex, or the relationship is over. Mordecai chooses to leave, showing the first signs of her independence and ability to trust in herself.

Book Reviews continued

A muddled area of her journey comes next, indicating the difficulty of finding oneself. Several poems appear about the pull between her responsibilities at home and her wish to learn, travel, and explore. She gives into the latter urges and spends time away from her home, learning from nature around her, receiving an education, and questioning the philosophies of life.

And just when the reader is safe and comfortable in this region of knowledge and exploration, Mordecai slips in three poems about the death of her mother. The unexpectedness of the poems reflects Mordecai's feelings about the unexpectedness of the death and she expresses this in "Expect It": "As you expect to come upon a sudden burst of sunlight or a hole trapping your ankle as you run or a missed friend on the stairs or for no reason tears in you man's eyes [,] expect to die" (48). This poem stresses not only the suddenness of losing a loved one, but how death itself, which can be considered the end of the journey of life, can come at anytime, not just after many years of living.

Mordecai's experience with death leads her to realize the value of life and individuality. In "Protest Poem," she fights back against the oppressive nature of her government, turning generalizations into individuals: "An ache is in a man. Towns do not ache, nor ghettoes fester […] the hurt is personal" (51). This is a way for her to speak out and insist that her life, her journey, is important. Not because she is part of a specific type of person, whether female, Jamaican, or poor, but herself and only herself.

Towards the end of her journey, death is once again introduced, but this time with a twist. Instead of death that occurs naturally or by someone's own hand, Mordecai breaches the subject of death by another simply because of hate. "Black bodies punctuating those chill dusks, their limp heads strung, a cruel umbilical to lordly trees" (55). It is a lesson for her that fighting back has its consequences as well. But a short passage about her grandmother sheds new light on the situation. "My Granny say she going die in that swing [.] my Granny say she feel like birds and angels[.] she say it tie her to the evening" (55). It gives a sense of peace-- that whatever the outcome of the fight, the fight is worth it.

For Mordecai, her journey is not about her birth or her death. It is not about specific people, places, or things. It is not even about the traveling from one place to another. It is about the moments along that journey that affect someone in a way that changes his or her path. It's about the stops along the way that move a person forward, not the movement itself. It is in these moments that the journey is truly taking place.

Book Reviews continued

Certifiable

Rhyming words can 'give me' a poem.
— Pamela Mordecai

This work is a delicious blend of colors, shapes, landscapes, and emotions. She keeps her perspective close to home, adding Creole phrases native to her Jamaican roots. The book is separated into three center pieces, each exploding with loaded themes such as racism, ignorance and misogyny, comparing each to the senses, matching taste with spite and earth with woman.

Using personification as a tool, she gives clouds personalities, looking down on a wedding party, embarrassed about the way they look in the poem "My Sister Gets Married." A dreamy scene painted by the author, of a seaside ceremony where she playfully compares guests to swa life referring to "crabs curl(ing) into their backs/ wrap(ing) shawls gainst cool breeze/ gainst the pride of the morning." She describes the husband to–be as "the one she will mate with," and describes her sisters measuring off his limps from a window in the house, dazily drifting to the evening when the two of them can make love. By the end, the sister sees herself as a "crab" surrendering to the inevitable "rheum in (her) eyes."

The poem "Dust" captures the despair in a woman who has been used by a man. She uses the literary tool of enjambment to describe a sexual encounter in which " in round two minutes/time three million sperm let loose…a dead serious search/for a black egg/to make into/another nigger." The poem draws a comparison between bright colors, such as "purple ripe/ star apple" and "red coat plum" to describe a sunset, and the image of the "black egg," the experience "bleached into fragile pallor" as the sun sets and the man leaves her thinking about what she has just given him. She exclaims that she has "yet to learn/ the lessons of a decent chastity," and ends with the sentiment that it is a rain of love that she is parched for, not a fruitful coming.

Book Reviews continued

The True Blue of Islands

I can vent my anger, or grief, or disappointment by writing poems and stories.
— Pamela Mordecai

A blitz of wry energy inspires this compact text. It is the energy of reporting the inhumane violence visited upon island folk for generations – specifically, violence of blacks upon their own kind, taking up where the buckra left off. Pamela Mordecai has traced the narrative of punishment and pain from the slave story of Great-Granny Mac to the murder of her brother Richard Alister John Anthony Hitchins in Botany Bay, Jamaica on 30 May 2004. *The True Blue of Islands* is dedicated to him and the title poem is an evocation of the night of his unexplained and senseless shooting, the night "my brother slips/his dark blue skin."

Kwame Dawes speaks truly when he calls this a beautiful collection. He praises it as "a short, compact piece of grace, deeply felt and immaculately crafted, thick with personal allusions and references, telling a massive story." That story is framed in violence and rooted in Caribbean History. Great-Granny Mac is at the beginning of the story of blue, and blue skins, blue guns, blue seas, blue tears is at the end for Richard Hitchins. The poet's sister cannot stop her tears ("My sister cries the sea") :

My sister is crying and crying
Her tears have joined up with the tide
The shells and the shallows have vanished. The earth and the heavens divide.
My sister cannot stop her tears.

Even in a fragment, the authoritativeness of Mordecai's craft calls with pain and outrage and weeping for the family that includes all the island peoples through a range of colors and eras. Mordecai knows how to cover a lot of history in short, telling strokes.

Book Reviews continued

The True Blue of Islands employs a broad range of Jamaican idioms and witty references that keeps the harsh subject matter from becoming maudlin or too painful to read. In fact, this collection reads swiftly and buoyantly. It is possible to read from cover to cover without pause and thus see the cohesiveness of the blue violence that has defined the history of Jamaica, and indeed, the Caribbean. Mordecai is a master of wry humour, weaving with superb craft and forceful honesty these songs of dread. Kamau Brathwaite has called her "one of the most brilliant and witty of our poets" and this collection of poems, validates this accolade. The opening narrative of Madeleine Lazare who bought her freedom with a little poison is replete with piquant humor – the poem's narrator tells Bellmartin, her black owner:

I need

for you to write
a notice saying it
was not my medicine
kill you, and sir,

if you get well, I need
a paper saying I
Madeleine Lazare
Mungo am free.

The lilting creole voice is woven through Mordecai's short, accessible lines. It speaks with authority of the family narrative of varied skin colours and accommodations to violence and threats of violence. The collection is divided into three over-arching narratives: Great-Gran Mac's story and family line, "Sunflowers" replete with stories of abuse, and *The True Blue of Islands*, the final narrative of Richard Hitchins. Racial content is a key motif as the narrative follows the story of "the race of tan" (Richard Hitchins' family line) from its inception in Madeleine, Great-Gran's favorite, to the murdered brother and two sisters who weep for him in today's Jamaica. Even in the tale of his murder there is wit and humor in the creole mode:

Book Reviews continued

Blue is the hue
exhausted
of his face
starting awake. It is the black
and bruise
of the dark hand
he wipes
across his brow
to try the truth
before his eye. Must be a lie. It seems he's
looking at a gun.

The entire text bleeds into this final poem, the title poem, giving honor to Richard and his grieving family, and yet doing so without pretension or clumsiness. Mordecai's brother is framed in family history of survival (Madeleine's story) and endurance (Nellie's story of childhood sexual abuse which opens "Sunflowers"). Richard is aligned with his father in the poet's world, he who knows the "comfort of making."

I see him plane wood now
and the shavings curl
bright browny-red like
the sun catch in the wood
and he planing leaves of light
so and so so and so
and the warm steady
noise of the plane
the comfort of making.

Pamela Mordecai

Book Reviews continued

Mordecai's tribute to the father is reminiscent of David Scott's and, for the clear orality in her call, to Lytton Kwesi Johnson's. Her poem "Shades", which precedes the closing poem of the Great-Gran Mac section, tells the story of the entire family from the point of view of the children, the poet and her sister, Lillibet. It is a testament to the days of hardware stores and close integration of the generations; never mind the anxieties of skin color.

Mordecai sings the resilience of women throughout her text. In "Great Writers and Toads" she speaks of the pretentious male writer who

> *Beats his wife: we found her*
> *little toad face busted in*
> *wart-skinned and goggle-eyed*
> *damp with the day's first showers*
> *two jewels of white teeth*
> *beside her on the grass.*

She draws on children's folksongs in "Bluebird or Granny Amy" and "Yellow Girl Blues" to illustrate the patterns of positivity and negativity that are inscribed deep in the children of mixed-race families. In "Sunflowers," she touches on madness, bringing to mind her previous book of poems, Certifiable.

Mordecai's first two books of poetry are *Journey Poem* and *de Man: a Performance Poem*. She is well known for the anthology of poems she edited, *From Our Yard: Jamaican Poetry since Independence* and for *Her True-True Name*, the path-breaking book of prose excerpts from Caribbean women's writing that she edited with her sister Betty Wilson. Mordecai's award-winning poems and stories for children are used in textbooks in Canada, the UK, USA and West Africa. She has acted, danced, taught, trained teachers, been a TV anchorperson, edited an academic journal and been a small press publisher. She develops language arts curricula for Caribbean students and works to promote women's writing. She lives in Toronto.

Book Reviews continued

The True Blue of Islands is a welcome addition to the Caribbean Poetry Series, which includes books by Gloria Escoffery, Edward Baugh, and Elaine Savory, among others. It is a fitting memoir and tribute to the poet's brother, the writing of trauma made bearable and placed in historic perspective within the narrative of the family and the Caribbean. It is a way of dealing with heartbreak that encourages readers to draw strength from it and share their stories, as well. I enjoyed this neatly packaged text with its beautiful cover design and rate it at five stars.

de Man

Peace, Naomi, peace. Dat's what de man did always say. Yuh, know, him madda tell me when him born di angels dem did full de sky wid singing: 'Peace on earth. Peace to de people of good mind-de ones dat bless instead of cuss.' Is sake of dat dem murder him. Him never care bout who yuh was, just what was in yuh heart.

— Pamela Mordecai, *de Man*

de Man is Pamela Mordecai's second book of poetry for adults. It is the product of a request from her pastor in 1989 to write a piece for their church's Good Friday Service. It is a performance poem; inherent in it is the expectation that it will be performed by those both familiar and unfamiliar with the language of Patois. The story may also be unfamiliar to readers and performers who have not heard an account of the crucifixion of Jesus. de Man reads as a largely human story, as witnessed by everyday people. Within this humanized account and in choosing to write the piece in Patois, Mordecai suggests both the story of the crucifixion of Jesus and the language of Patois possess a twofold universality.

The Christian story of the crucifixion of Jesus is often told in a formal, distant and impersonal manner. Mordecai's rendering transforms the story into her own testament, told through the lips of everyday Jamaican people. The female middle-aged narrator, Naomi, declares the crucifixion as "not a ting but politricks-dat and red-eye", a political move motivated by jealously. Once Jesus dies, and perhaps like many people, Samuel the disabled, older male narrator, and Naomi conclude "[Jesus] was a special child fi true", but "[they] nuh know if him was God son". It is retold in a raw and organic language-yet, it is a language so revered by Mordecai, that she concludes that even "God speaks creole."

Book Reviews continued

Mordecai is adamant in her insistence that patois does not exist as an alternative voice or as a sub-standard dialect of expression-- it is the essence of the local people of Jamaica and the mechanism by which they communicate with one another and with God.

The seemingly dichotomous relationship of locality and specificity and of universality and reverence is fused together in de Man. This personal testament chronicles an ultimately human story. The language of Patois, Mordecai's language, serves as the link between story and faith, and between man and God.

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Pamela Mordecai

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